

# Merger vote 50 years ago created Green Bay's east side

Scott Cooper Williams, Press-Gazette Media 6:03 p.m. CST November 2, 2014

Residents in the town of Preble had it all: their own restaurants, stores, parks — everything.

And Green Bay wanted it all.

After a long struggle over Green Bay's efforts to annex Preble, the two municipalities asked voters 50 years ago on Monday to decide a ballot measure that would change the region forever.

On the same day Lyndon Johnson was elected president in 1964, voters in Green Bay and Preble settled a long-running feud by agreeing to combine their neighboring municipalities into one.

The merger nearly doubled Green Bay's size geographically, and it vaulted the city from Wisconsin's sixth-largest to fourth-largest in population, jumping overnight from 66,000 people to 81,000.

Green Bay also gained control of vast undeveloped acreage along such key future corridors as Mason Street and Deckner Avenue.

Green Bay Mayor Jim Schmitt calls the Preble merger among the most significant events in local history, noting that it brought improved services to town residents while clearing the way for development of what today is the city's east side.

"That's a model of success," Schmitt said. "Some people back then had a lot of vision."



The town of Preble and city of Green Bay are shown on this map as they appeared side by side before the merger. (Photo: Scott Cooper Williams/Press-Gazette Media)

But the merger did not occur without years of bickering between the city and town, followed by a bruising political campaign that was a hot-button issue in 1964.

Even half a century later, some former Preble residents remember the pain of watching their beloved town virtually vanish from the landscape.

Bill Dessart, who fondly recalls growing up in Preble, was a high school student when his parents actively opposed the merger referendum. The town had cultivated its own identity, he said, and many people wanted to maintain that independence.

"The ties were real strong," he said, adding that the merger "was kind of hard to swallow."

The decision to consolidate came after a period of 100 years during which the two liked-sized communities co-existed on opposite sides of the East River.

Preble was chartered in 1859 — five years after Green Bay — and enjoyed decades of steady growth and development. Named after war hero Edward Preble, the town eventually had its own fire department, water department, three parks, numerous churches, a VFW post, six elementary schools and one high school that remains known today as Preble High School.



The town of Preble had its own water department, as well as a fire department, schools, parks and much more. (Photo: Neville Public Museum of Green Bay)

Although much of the town was farmland, residents could buy groceries at Renier's Market, do their banking at Preble State Bank, grab lunch at Kroll's restaurant and enjoy dinner at the Zuider Zee Supper Club or Stratosphere Supper Club.

"We liked it here," recalled longtime resident Marion Kipp. "We thought it was a nice place."

Green Bay, meanwhile, had successfully merged in 1895 with Fort Howard to the west. And the city soon began eyeing annexation of Preble to the east.

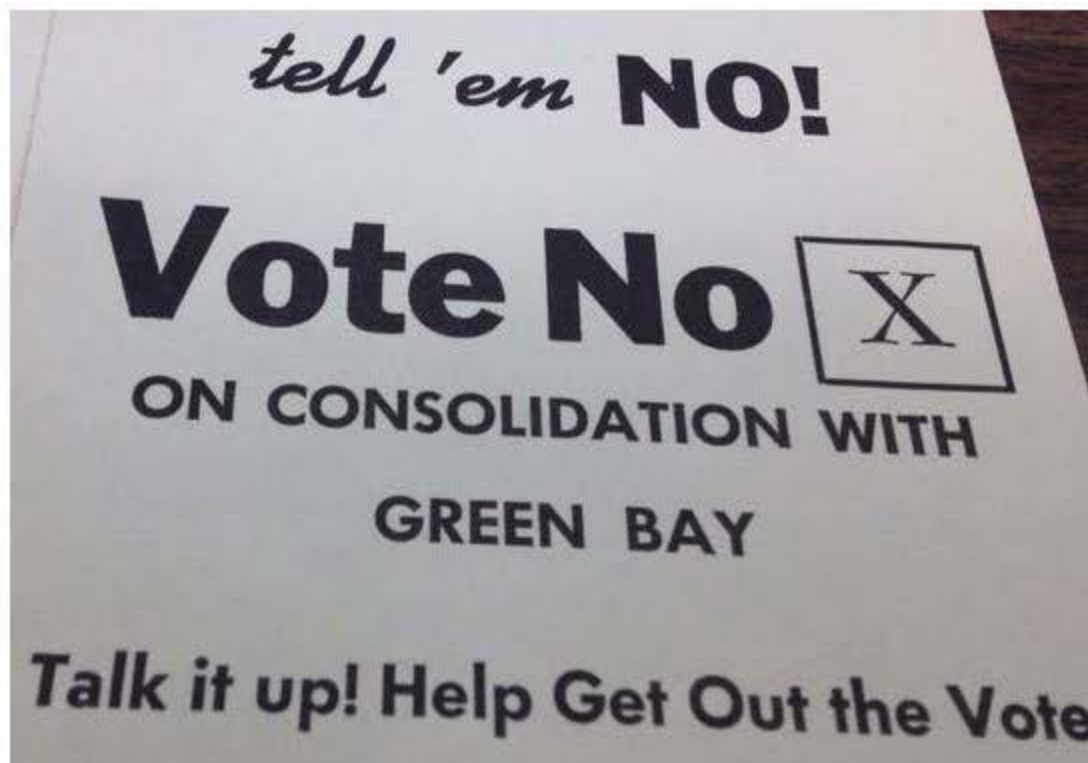
Records of the Brown County Historical Society indicate that as Green Bay pursued annexation, Preble town leaders moved against annexation by trying to incorporate as a village or city. Town residents voiced mixed feelings, however, and they narrowly rejected a 1952 ballot measure to form a city.



Years of debate on the issue culminated in the merger referendum held simultaneously in both Preble and Green Bay on Nov. 3, 1964.

Proponents argued that a merger would mean better government services for Preble and more orderly development of the town's sprawling farm fields. Opponents feared that townsfolk would face higher taxes and would lose their sense of identity.

One campaign flier warned Preble residents: "Green Bay wants to marry you only for your money."



Opponents of the merger argued that Preble should remain its own community and not be "gobbled up" by Green Bay. (Photo: Scott Cooper Williams/Press-Gazette Media)

Gary Tilkens, who graduated from Preble High School in 1964, said he and other opponents feared losing the small-town atmosphere that they enjoyed while growing up in Preble.

"To us, the city was taking over," he said.

But local farmer Ed Holschuh said he supported the merger and looked forward to the accelerated development that would follow. As builders transformed the countryside, property values increased and the family prospered.

Holschuh recalled that opposition to the merger seemed to come largely from Preble political leaders who worried about losing their clout.

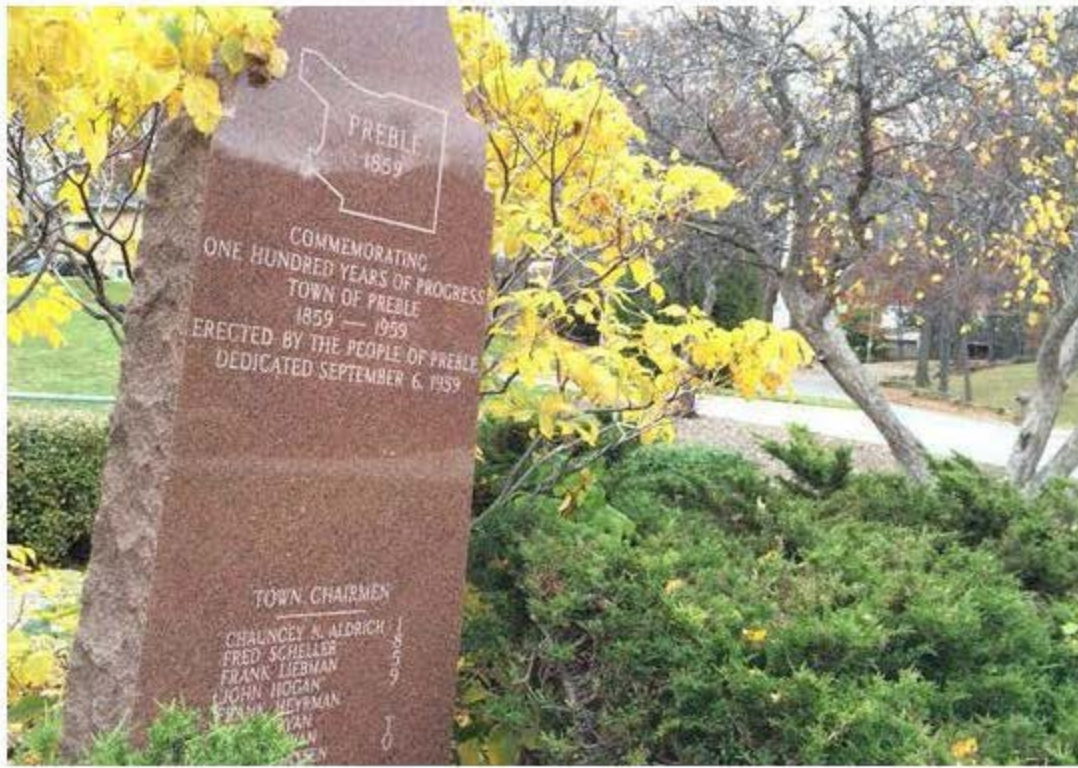
"You're talking about giving all the power to Green Bay, and you don't know how it's going to go," he said. "But it turned out good."

When all the votes were counted on Election Day, the merger was approved by wide margins in both communities.

Merger opponents immediately sounded a conciliatory tone, and the municipalities consolidated quickly under the Green Bay name. Green Bay's city council grew from 24 aldermen to 30 aldermen, with new representatives from the former town.

Preble High School remains as perhaps the town's most visible legacy. But other landmarks still exist, too, including a

monument that was erected near Preble Park in 1959 to commemorate the town's centennial.



The centennial monument still stands near Preble Park at Hillside Lane and Skyline Boulevard. (Photo: Scott Cooper Williams/Press-Gazette Media )

Tim Van Beek, whose father, Norris, was a leading opponent of the merger, said the town inevitably faded from memory for many people, as the years marched on and generations of former residents passed away.

"It was a natural process," Van Beek said. "It was just the way of the world."

Residents in portions of the former town last year created the Preble Park Neighborhood Association — one of 40 such neighborhood groups throughout Green Bay.

Schmitt said the city has welcomed Preble's families, schools and neighborhoods into Green Bay for many years. Any acrimony that existed between the two municipalities, the mayor said, has long since been overcome.

While acknowledging that people in the 1950s and '60s wanted to save the town, the mayor said the Preble name endures to this day and the town has not been forgotten.

"What did they want to save?" the mayor said. "They wanted to save the identity, they wanted to save the name. And they have all that."

## OFFICIAL REFERENDUM BALLOT

If you desire to vote for any question, make a cross (X) or other mark in the square after the words "FOR CONSOLIDATION" underneath such question.

If you desire to vote against any question, make a cross (X) or other mark in the square after the words "AGAINST CONSOLIDATION" underneath such question.

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"On the question of consolidation of the Town of Preble with the City of Green Bay, according to the terms of the Consolidation Ordinances adopted by the Town Board of the Town of Preble, Brown County, Wisconsin and the City Council, of the City of Green Bay, Brown County, Wisconsin".

FOR CONSOLIDATION ..... ☐

AGAINST CONSOLIDATION ..... ☐

The ballot as it appeared to voters in both communities on Nov. 3, 1964. (Photo: Scott Cooper Williams/Press-Gazette Media)

### REFERENDUM RESULTS ON MERGER

Municipality ... Yes ... No

Green Bay ... 16,488 ... 4,128

Preble ... 3,784 ... 1,855

*Source: Press-Gazette Media archives*